

1873

*Skylark*



*If I can't write, what can I do?*

*-Theodore Roethke*

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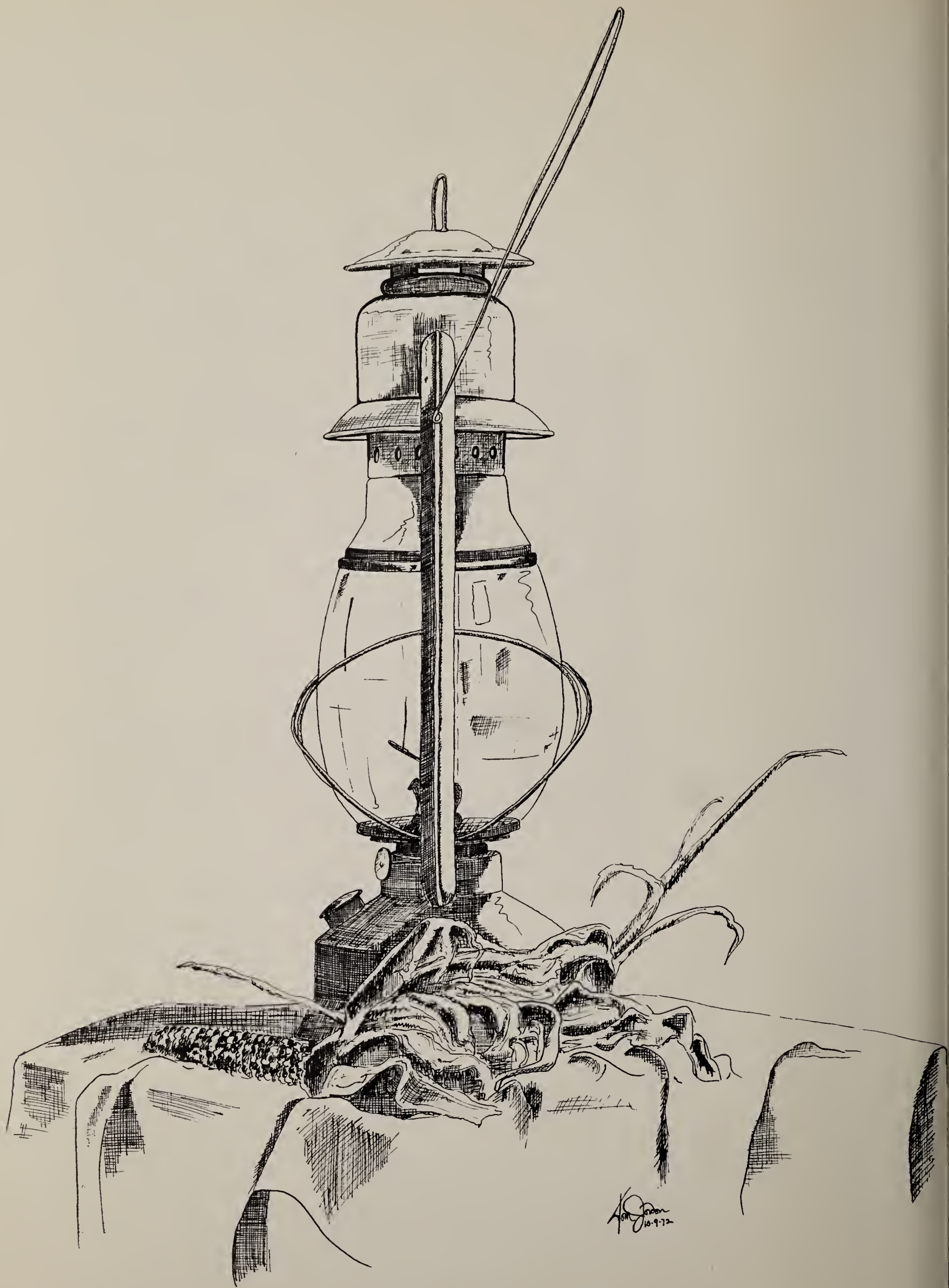
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The Dark Man by the Kankakee





What the Wind Brings

A cold wind stumbled through the dark forest, over the barren ground, crashing against trees and shrubs. Frozen branches shivered as it passed. Later it would bring snow, but now it only brought a message; that it would be many weeks until spring. There was a two-room, log cabin in the forest and the wind wandered over and around it, brushing against the door and pulling at the windows. It was the wind of Christmas Eve, 1843.

The cabin was warm. A large stone fireplace in the kitchen, or main room, was glowing and sputtering as flames played over the fresh-cut logs. Hanging inside the fireplace, but away from the fire, were dried fish and strips of dried meat. On the mantel were pewter mugs, a bullet mold, and a roll of string for candle making. To the right of the fireplace were shelves that held plates and other tableware, bags of salt and flour, and earthenware jars of sugar, dried corn and herbs. The wall opposite the fireplace had a heavy door hanging on thick leather hinges. Firewood was stacked on the plank floor. An axe, other tools and wooden buckets were laid along the floor, or were hanging from the log wall.

The room also had a chest-on-chest cabinet, one of the few pieces of furniture the family had brought with them to Illinois, and a child's bed. At the foot of the bed there was a chest. It had a rounded top and brass hinges. A ladder in the middle of the room led to a storage loft overhead. Next to the ladder was a small, rough table with three straight-back chairs.

Mary Ford, then six years old, sat in one of the chairs, picking at a strip of deer jerky. Her mother hadn't cooked supper that evening. She had gone to bed in the late afternoon, telling Mary that there might be a baby in the house before Christmas. Her mother's bed was in the smaller room, next to the kitchen. A blanket covered the door.

The little girl's father pulled the blanket aside and came out into the kitchen. He sat at the table and watched his daughter eat the meat. "You should drink some water with that," he said, more to himself than to her.

"Daddy, tomorrow is Christmas, isn't it? And we're going to have a baby. Do you know what else? Mommy said that I was going to get a real doll for Christmas, with a china face and china arms."



"When did she say that?" He didn't know about the doll.

"A long time ago, last week, maybe. I remember, Mommy said I should have a doll. Do you think Mommy wants a baby? I really want a doll. A nice doll, a store doll. Is that alright?" She got up to get water from a pitcher. Her father didn't answer her. He was worried.

It was late and time for Mary to go to bed. Usually her mother and father kissed her goodnight after she was covered up, but not tonight. "Mary," her father said, "You have to go in and kiss your mother. She can't come out--"

"I know, because she is going to have a baby." Mary went into the bedroom.

"Mommy, open your eyes. Kiss me goodnight. Mommy?"

Her mother opened her eyes. She was a pretty woman, but now her hair was matted and damp, and her face was pale. She was lying on her side, facing Mary. "Are you going to bed now, honey? Did you say your prayers?"

"No, not yet. Can I say them here, with you?" Mary knelt next to her mother's bed and lowered her head. Whenever the little girl prayed, she whispered so quietly that she couldn't be heard. "God can hear me," she always said.

The mother reached out from under the blankets and touched the girl's hair. It was the softest thing she knew. When Mary looked up, she saw tears in her mother's eyes. "Do you hurt, Mommy?"

"Not really, only a little. You go to sleep now."

Mary kissed her mother, said goodnight, and started to turn away. Her mother called her back, "Mary, before you go to bed, I want to tell you something very important. Tonight, or in the morning, your father might need a cow horn."

"Cow horn. What for?"

"Never mind, just remember that if he asks you where the cow horn is, it's in my linen chest, by your bed. Get it for him if he asks you." She reached out again for the girl and touched her face. "Goodnight, Mary." She might have been saying goodbye.

In the kitchen, Mary's father had blown out the candles and was putting on his overcoat. "You put your nightgown on and get under the covers. I'll be back in a munute." He picked up two wooden buckets and, as he opened the door, Mary could see that the wind was whipping snow against the cabin. Her father pulled the door shut behind him and, leaning against the wind, walked past the cow shed to the stream.

Mary was in bed when he returned with the water. He put it in a kettle and then hung the kettle in the fireplace, far enough



from the flames so the water would become warm without boiling. He took his coat off, hung it over a chair and started for the bedroom. "Daddy, I'm in bed. Kiss me," Mary called. He kissed her goodnight and went to his wife.

Firelight was dancing across the walls and ceiling as the little girl pulled the covers over her shoulders and closed her eyes. She tried to imagine what her china doll would look like. Last Christmas, in New York, her cousin had gotten a china doll.

Christmas, last year, had been so nice. All of her family had gotten together at Aunt Mildred's house on Dutch Hill. They went in the morning with presents for everyone. The men had talked in the front room while the women cooked in the kitchen.

In the morning, the kitchen smelled of flour, vegetables, and the turkey that had just been killed by Uncle Cecil. Later in the day, as the kitchen became warmer from the big iron stove's heat, everyone could smell fresh bread and cookies, baked potatoes, and roast turkey. Mary remembered all that, and then fell asleep thinking about her china doll. Tomorrow she would have a doll and her mother would have a baby.

During the night she occasionally half-woke to hear her father in the kitchen, at the fireplace. He kept the fire up, but most of the time he was in the bedroom. Sometimes she heard her mother cry out, once very loudly, but then, late in the night, everything was quiet, and Mary slept soundly, warmly in her bed.

The next morning, early, just as the sun was coming up, Mary was awakened by a small cry. Her father was sitting in a chair, next to the fireplace. He was holding what Mary knew was a baby. She climbed out of bed and ran to his side. "Is that our baby? Let me look. Can I hold it?"

Her father stared ahead, beyond the closed door and deep into the forest. The baby cried again. He knew he had to feed the baby. "Mary," he said softly, "Your mother said you knew where there was a cowhorn. Get it for me."

"I'll get it. I know where it is." Mary went to the linen chest, lifted the latch and raised the top. It was very heavy. Mary had never opened the chest before. She looked in. There, on top of white linen, was a small cow horn, smooth and hollow, with a small hole at the end. And next to the cow horn, on top of white linen, was a doll, a doll with china arms and a china face.

Outside the cabin, a few snowflakes reflected sunlight as they fell slowly to the ground. The wind was gone.





Jorge Cisneros

Nameless

Who are you?  
Asks a child  
To an old man

I am a wisp of smoke  
From a dying fire  
Vanishing amidst the air  
Into a sky so blue.

I am the faint light  
Of a dying sun  
Vanishing into space only to  
Be imprisoned in frosted glass.

Word

A word is intangible  
But still it has a life  
Given birth by the  
Breath of its creator.

Ken Zishka

i walked along  
the shore  
of the deepest ocean  
where the water  
would rush around  
my feet  
and the wind  
came across the horizon  
i felt the sky  
deep within my eyes

i walked without a reason to run.

Silent Anger

Behind locked iron doors,  
A tempest stirs its foreboding countenance  
and whirls and thrashes  
in mounting intensity.

Crushing any blossom,  
Grinding any jewel,  
Fury laughs and rips apart the  
Soul of I.

But all is serene  
On the other side of the iron complexity  
which constitutes a body.  
Glassy eyes never penetrate the blast furnace  
where Fury thrives.

#

everywhere i go  
shadow comes with me  
through the yellow  
and the green  
and the white  
my silent companion  
never leaves me  
mister black comes to me often  
and gives me some grey  
and says i should get rid of  
shadow  
but though shadow is a weight  
dragging at my back  
i keep him

if there is no shadow  
there is no  
i



Karen Gunty

When I was a child I was not conscious of fleeting time;  
Eternities seemed to pass between hours;  
Length of days were measured not by hours;  
But by how dirty I became; how bad were the cuts.  
Memories became better relived, as time went on.

Now as I look back, I long to be unconscious once again;  
Unpressured by time; not conscious of its shortness.  
For the days and weeks pass too quickly,  
And all the moments that I long to treasure are becoming  
dusty and vague;  
And I wish that time could stop and let me recall.

Priscilla Nemeth

Like thick black velvet drapes  
of an unsuspecting nature  
silence draws upon me  
muffling, pleasant, warm  
confining.  
From ceiling to floor,  
lost in the folds  
a slow panic growing -- familiar  
like dreams not quite remembered.

Gary Czerwinski

The wind is quiet.  
On the water nothing moves  
Becoming green-glazed  
As a polished plane of jade.  
A butterfly glides across.

Robin L. Munari

He walks along the seashore  
at dusk  
with a solemn nature about him  
as though  
he knows not himself

He turns around and sees  
a beautiful pain  
heading straight toward him  
which causes  
time to stand still

He reaches out and touches  
soft and warm  
his only reason in life  
which contains  
his final wish for peace

He gently wipes the sweat from his brow  
cool and lingering  
which had formed that day  
caused by  
worry of what may be

S. L. Mills

City Heat

Constant whirl of fans;  
Distant doors slam like bullets  
In the hot, still night.

A Playground of War

On the airstrip one of the company choppers was parked. The crew stood waiting.

Jim and the 1st Sergeant climbed aboard the craft and the door-gunners signalled ready. The huey started its climb. The pilot and co-pilot were at the controls with Jim and the 1st Sergeant behind in the passenger seats. The two door-gunners straddled the machine-guns on each side of the craft. The chopper rose and was above the trees steadying at 1500 feet. Jim and the 1st Sergeant eased back in the seats, enjoying the breeze. It was refreshing. The pilots and the door-gunners kept each other posted as to the conditions of the flight; each hoping for a trouble-free flight but never relaxing while in the air.

"What's the name of this village we're going to?" Jim asked.

Jim's voice, slightly short of a yell, was barely audible over the constant thump of the rotor and the wind whipping through the cabin. Without flight helmets conversation proved difficult.

"We're going to Bien Cat. It's about five miles out."

"Oh," said Jim. "What are we going out there for?"

"I'll tell you later."

Ahead was a small cluster of huts enclosed by strands of barbed wire. The village was in an excellent site, the surrounding lands were flat and clear. Huts were constructed of jungle brush, trees, and timber and scattered throughout the enclosure. The perimeter consisted of a few strands of barbed wire stretched straight. There were no bunkers or trenches; the only shelters from rocket and mortar attacks were small mounds of dirt to huddle behind. Most of the villagers were outside the gates watching the helicopter approach.

"That's a helluva welcoming committee out there," Jim said.

"That's far from a welcoming committee. It's usually this way; almost everyone piles out of the village to see us. Of course, they all have their own reasons. Most of them hate us, hoping for something tragic, others are curious, and a few are actually happy to see us."



"So that's Bien Cat. Not very big, is it? What are we going to do out here?"

"The old man wants us to build a playground out here; he calls it part of the pacification program. The first thing we'll be bringing out is a see-saw. It's already built, all we need is the chief's approval."

"These people are half naked, living in shacks and probably starving and we're bringing out a see'saw. Who's idea was this?"

"Jim, we're only following orders."

"All right, I'm not going to buck the system, but a playground! Well, do you think he'll go along with it?"

"Should, they haven't anything to lose. They can't stand out guts but they sure like our money. That playground doesn't mean a thing to them, it's just that buck. What really kills me is the report we'll turn in later. We'll tell the old man that the chief okayed the idea and he'll send a success story to the general. That's the pacification program, totally worthless."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I brought some candy with me. While I'm in with the chief, pass it out to the kids. We may as well do something worthwhile out here."

The chopper arrived at the village. It descended, hovered, and gently touched down. Jim and the 1st Sergeant jumped down from the ship and made their way through the crowd.

"Wait here, I'll be right back," said the 1st Sergeant.

Jim walked over to the children and began offering the candy. Most of the children were afraid but a few of the older ones took the gift. The younger children followed and soon the candy was gone. Jim tried to talk to the children but once they had the candy they wouldn't go near him.

Within minutes, the 1st Sergeant was returning from the conference. He stopped for Jim and together they walked back to the chopper.

"Is he for it?" asked Jim.

"Yeah, I'll be coming back this afternoon. They're going to dig the holes so all we'll have to do is pour the foundation."

The two men climbed into the chopper. It lifted off the ground and started back to the base. The trip only required a few minutes in the air. The chopper descended, passing the trees, and gently touched down on the airstrip.



The 1st Sergeant briefed the crew as to the afternoon itinerary. Jim got the jeep, picked up the 1st Sergeant and headed back to the company area.

"Top, why don't we take the see-saw down there in a truck? The roads aren't bad and it's a short trip."

"I'm not sure how long it'll take and I don't want anyone on the roads after four. I'm not going to risk any lives for this bullshit program."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Jim, I hope you don't mind but you're not going back this afternoon."

"Why not?"

"Because I want you to run a supply check at Phu Loi. That'll kill your afternoon."

"Well then, why'd you take me out there this morning?"

"I like your company."

"Thanks a lot."

"Jim, how about taking the see-saw down to the airstrip before you take off?"

"Sure, I'll take it."

"Good. How about some chow?"

"Nah."

"Why not?"

"If I hurry, I can get back tonight."

"You'll finish too late. Just spend the night down there. The roads aren't safe. Take your time, do a good job and come back tomorrow. There's no rush. Come on, let's get something to eat."

"All right."

The jeep pulled into the small parking area outside the club and the two men got out. They walked along a wooden walkway and entered the club. It was dark and it smelled of hamburgers and beer. They sat at one of the tables.

"Let's get a couple of steaks. I'll buy," said the 1st Sergeant.

"No, I'll get it."

"Listen, I make a little more than you, I'll get it."

"All right, but next time's mine."

"What're you drinking?"

"Bud."

"Be right back."

The 1st Sergeant walked over to the bar, placed his order and returned with the two drinks. He handed one to Jim. Jim took a sip.

"Ya know, I still haven't gotten used to this flat beer."

I'd love to get one with a little zest in it, just once."

"You'll get your zest when you get home. By the way, how many days d'ya got left?"

"Forty-seven."

"You're pretty short now, getting excited?"

"Excited? Yeah, I guess so."

"You guess so? If I had forty-seven days left I'd be going out of my mind. What're you gonna do when you get home?"

"Probably just take it easy till school starts. I'm gonna try to finish this time."

"What about your girl, is she excited?"

"I don't know, I haven't heard from her lately....How's your family?"

"Pretty good. Mary took the kids up to her folks' in Michigan. They'll have a better time there than on an army base. That's one of my regrets; this career has been tough on my family, but it's almost over now. I'll be getting out this February, then I'll be a regular nine-to-fiver." It'll give me a chance to get to know my family."

"Where you gonna settle down after you retire?"

"I think I'm gonna buy a place near my in-laws. I like it up there."

"You hunt?"

"I used to but I gave it up, something about it bothered me."

"How about fishing? You still fish, don't you?"

"Yeah, I go out with the kids."

"Maybe we can get together back in the states, do a little fishing or something."

"I'd like that, It would be good to see you and you could meet Mary and the kids."

The girl behind the bar signalled for the 1st Sergeant. He walked over. He paid for the meals and carried them back to the table. They began eating and finished with little conversation.

They left the club and got into the jeep. The 1st Sergeant looked at his watch.

"It's almost one...I didn't think it was that late. Jim, take me to the company, I'll only be a second. When I get done, we'll go get the see-saw and take it to the airstrip. I have to be there by one."

The jeep left the club and headed down the dusty, bumpy road to the company. The rough ride was short. The jeep pulled into the company area and parked near the orderly room. The 1st Sergeant jumped out and hustled into the



tent. Within minutes he returned.

"I had to brief the old man. Now let's get that god-damn see-saw."

"Who worked on it?"

"Nelson."

"Nelson? How'd ya ever get that crabby son-of-a-bitch to weld it up?"

"A pass, what else?"

"Yeah, that sounds like Nelson. He's some operator."

The jeep pulled into the work area where a man was busy welding on a cobra gun ship.

"Hey, Nelson, is that you?" the 1st Sergeant yelled.

The man turned from the work and lifted the welding mask. "Yeah, it's me."

"Where's our secret weapon?"

"Inside the tent. Hey, Top, I even painted it, keep that in mind when you're writing up that pass."

Jim and the 1st Sergeant went into the tent and brought the see-saw out. They placed it across the back of the jeep and tied it down with ropes.

"Hay, Nelson, you got any cables?" the 1st Sergeant asked.

"Inside, on the wall."

"Come over here and get 'em."

"Get'em yourself, can't you see I've got work to do?"

Jim went back into the tent, returned with the cables, and threw them on the back of the jeep. The two men took their seats. Jim turned around as they were moving.

"Hey, Nelson, don't be so helpful next time, you crabby son-of-a-bitch."

"Get bent."

Jim turned around to the road and glanced over to the 1st Sergeant. "I sure like that Nelson. He's grumpy, but he'll do anything for you, if you ask him."

"Yeah, he's a good boy, but he sure hates the army. Did you notice that he never wears a complete uniform, he says that's his personal protest to the army. He wouldn't even go on R&R because he had to wear his khakis."

Jim pulled the jeep off the road and began driving down the airstrip. He drove up and parked along side the chopper. The two door-gunners untied the ropes and removed the see-saw. They placed it on the ground next to the legs of the huey. Jim came with the cables.

"I'll give you a long hook-up so you can hover over

it without landing."

He choked the cables around the see-saw at each end and secured the cables to the rails at the bottom of the craft.

"Well, Top, look's like you're all set."

"We better get going. I'll see you tomorrow, Jim."

Jim started the jeep and moved it out of the swing of the propellor. It started spinning and gradually increased its speed. The chopper started vibrating and jumping up and down. The back of the ship rose, then the whole craft lifted off the ground hovering a few feet in the air. The craft kept rising until the cables were drawn tight and the see-saw rose hanging several feet below. Jim waved and watched the chopper drift away. The huey flew low over the airstrip as it headed toward the trees. It started to climb over the trees but the see-saw hit one of the branches and was pulled back. An instant later, it broke loose and swung under the chopper and up into the propellor. The body of the craft began swinging violently as it headed down. The three in back were hurled from the craft. It continued spinning until it crashed into the trees and burst into flames.

Jim ran down the airstrip and into the small forest. One of the door-gunners was lying dead near the flaming wreckage. Jim ran past the body searching for the 1st Sergeant. He found him. His body was wedged in the fork of a tree. He was dead. Above his body, at the top of the tree, was the see-saw, gently rocking in the breeze.

Gary Czerwinski

*The afternoon rain  
Whispering through the forest  
Confines me within  
The winding paths of my mind.  
I suffer in loneliness.*



Bob Rudolph

DOA

I was hit by a car last night;  
pain was great, many broken bones.  
My body was a bent and bloody contortion.  
The air was cold.

Six or seven people stood around, maybe more.  
One poor woman got sick, she couldn't stand the blood (o, rh+)  
An old gentleman shook his head and complained:  
"Dang machines, never was so many accidents in my day."  
Some boys in beads and beards and long flowing hair, with  
their girls looking the same way (without the beards),  
strolled by, watched, and then walked on.  
The single eye of a television camera scanned my face, and  
the image of my twisted body appeared in the city's  
living rooms at supper time (after two toothpaste and  
before one insurance commercial).  
It must have been getting dark because hot, bright lights  
were used.

I was a little uncomfortable;  
the sweat dripped from my forehead  
and mingled with a pool of blood at my face

Exactly when the ambulance was called, I don't know,  
but I can vaguely remember the driver  
telling the nurse  
at the hospital  
that I had died sometime on the way.

After the first death, there is no other.

-Dylan Thomas

Bob Rudolph

Kids play with guns,  
toy guns  
on my block.

They have wars, and play cops-and-robbers, and have shootouts.  
The smell of fired caps hangs heavy in the air  
and goes to my stomach (not even coming near my lungs)  
through my nose.  
And it makes me sick.

Among the sounds of exploding caps, and the high pitched whine  
of a falling shell launched by an eight-year-old's throat  
and the throbbing metallic grind made by acid-smelling M-14's  
I hear shouts:

"Pow, you're dead!"  
"You missed!"  
"I got you!"  
"But I don't look dead."

Kids play with guns  
in wars  
in wars in Asia.

There are fast volleys of shots,  
But there are no rest periods called in wars,  
no trading of sides,  
no restoring the casualties, and  
no forging of new alliances like the ones formed every  
five minutes on my block.  
No one breaks up the fighting;  
No father to say:

"Quit! You're too loud!"  
And no one shouts  
"You're dead!"  
And no one answers  
"But I don't look dead."

Because he is.

Bob Rudolph

The Old Playground

On this last cold afternoon  
I sit swinging in my childhood playground,  
Watching the winter sun gleam in the southwest  
And sink through the bare branches behind the school.

Swing up and back; high and far  
Laughing, I can almost touch the phantom memories--  
The tree spined hills, their sand eroded now  
Replaced by prefabricated, portable classrooms.

The football field--a long gone pond in someone else's memory--  
Muddy and grassless with a rotting blocking horse sitting on  
its edge,  
Used to be our baseball diamond or a place to play at war,  
Or ride bicycles with friends by the evening twilight.

Now most are long gone away,  
In late teens or early twenties; beginning their prime, the  
peak of life  
On which this winter sun sets with increasing speed to bring  
it to an end.  
And empty swings lie still over glass glittered gravel.

It's time to go, to walk away;  
To take my little brother by the hand and zip his coat up.  
Tell him all the stories of funny days and play with him in  
thin-iced puddles,  
And walk behind him running behind a limply jogging old man.

This is what I am--that's what I was--and that is what I'll be.  
Taking Jim's hand and walking home  
Letting the sun set quietly away.





Beside the Road

Snow has lost its appeal since I've lived up here. It is wet and cold--it gets up the hole in my shoe and makes my feet miserable and gooshy. My car is cold inside and goes aauurrrghgh when I try to start it at 6:42 every morning. The cold, the wind and the snow zip under my clothes like so many icy hands up a girl's blouse. I get the willies, who-boy, I shiver and say hotdam under my breath as I walk in the snow.

West Texas was dry. God, it was dry and dusty and hot. I was a kid in West Texas and I used to live in a dusty junk house. A house in the process of collapsing. Flies and a few field mice shared the dust with us, although they didn't seem to care much for our company. Flies came in through holes in our screen door. You remember the sound of a screen door like ours if you've ever heard it. Creak...bam. The whole damn house shuddered when the screen door slammed; the dust on everything would fly. My mother generally screamed, but the words only chased one of the fleeing snotnosed kids to the front yard unheard. I was one of those door slamming kids who ran raggle taggle out of the house into a yard cluttered with old tires, broken toys, trash, and beer cans thrown from the highway. I ran amuck in those days, right there in that junk yard by the junk house.

I played games you never heard of. Throw the beer can back at the Chevrolet was the best, even though I never did any good at it. The dust on my arm became a smelly beery mud; but it dried up. I never thought of washing it off. I had no desire to be the only clean person I knew. Nobody around York Town was ever clean for long. The old bullshit about Saturday night was really true, except we usually made it Friday night. My mother put us younger kids in the kitchen sink to bathe; the older kids must have taken a real bath somewhere--I never noticed.

We got clean once a week because we walked to town--well, it was just a double pump Esso station and grocery store together--we walked there on most every Saturday morning. There was a path along side the highway from people like us walking to the store. I wonder how many people like us there were. It was a deep path. It was just a few feet from the pavement where those exotically sculptured cars of the early '50s roared past us on the way to god knows where.

Once in a while, not often, one of those cars would stop at the grocery store to gas up and ask how to get somewhere else. I



can remember marvelling at a 1950 Ford while its owner was inside, under the store's electric fan, having a beer. I could barely see into the car, but I wished I could climb in and drive away from that unpainted, run-down store with a chicken feed sign on the side.

We could see that sign as we walked within 200 yards of the store. In big letters, PURINA FEEDS was spelled out against red and white checks. There was a picture of a fat chicken eating out of a shiny aluminum trough. Our chickens didn't look like that. They looked like us, skinny.

I carried dead, skinny chickens in a soggy paper sack up to that store on Saturday morning. We sold them to the guy who was the butcher, owner, pharmacist, gas pumper, and bill collector. He bought a few chickens from us; I don't know why. Hell, he probably couldn't sell our chickens. Too skinny. My mother didn't come to sell chickens; it seemed to work better when she sent two or three barefoot kids.

That store held everything I had ever wanted; it was full of things for poor people to look at: rows and rows of canned beans and vegetables; a candy counter with jawbreakers and baseball card gum; an ice cream chest with a picture of Elsie the Cow on the side; cantaloupes, peaches, strawberries, and watermelons; salt pork and pork chops; boxed cereals; Davy Crockett coonskin caps; gray union made work clothes; thick leather belts with nickel-plated cowboy buckles in the shape of the state of Texas.

Plastered on one inside wall was a big picture of a Coca-Cola girl with a lipsticky smile. She was a breasty blonde who leered over the store like she knew everyone was looking straight at her tits. Ranchers and hands and teenagers always sneaked a good look. Beside the girl was a West Texas cowboy plains mural printed by the county bank. "Happy Trails, Amigos". It blended into the wall unseen. You could look out the dirty window and see the same empty picture. But I never saw a girl like the Coca-Cola girl. My first vision of boobs.

Down the single aisle of the store a string ran, just below the lazy electric fan. The brims of western style straw hats were clothespinned to the string. Working men, whose hats were old and brown with sweat from the hatband up, would walk along looking at the new hats. Their heavy shitkicker boots made the wood floor sag with a hollow sound. They talked in a loud, raspy voice all the time to the owner or to themselves.

"Shitfire, it shore is hot."

"Lemme get you some cold beer from--"

"My pickup broke down out by Leonard's place yesterday and

then I turnt right around and had my tar blow this morning out in that fucking sun. But fuck almighty, it's cool in here under this fan. I got half a mind to set right here and drank a couple with you."

"I'll get 'em while--"

"Yeah, I wish that gal on the wall would come around here, I could shore use some tonight."

After talking and drinking a while, the cowboys would find a hat just like the one they used to have and tell the owner to write it up. Everybody told him that. You were supposed to pay at the end of the month or whenever you sold your chickens or did whatever you did. I never really knew, but I think we never paid enough at the end of the month. I could tell because my oldest sister looked embarrassed when the owner noticed us. He knew who we were. He watched us when we went in his store.

"Get on away from them fummybooks, you just mess 'em up."

Even when we were clean on Saturday morning, we were still dirty.

The walk home along the other path on the other side of the highway seemed longer. We had that old house with chicken wire pens to go back to. We had seen kids eat ice cream at the store. I thought about that once in a while, even as a kid.

Saturday night was the only halfway decent thing that happened to us around York Town. When my father was gone--most of the time--my mother took us outside to the front yard by the highway. We made pallets from old quilts and we all lay there looking at the Texas stars. The world was dark except for the dim silent approaching lights of cars speeding past us, never knowing that we were there looking up beside the road. We watched shooting stars and my brothers and I portioned the skies and began a count.

My mother's voice was calm and rather mystical as I recall it now. It would only put me to sleep then. I was more interested in the strange whizz of the cars. She told stories about how we might move out and maybe go to Dallas, get right out of the junk house. My mother had folk in Dallas, folk that would help. I went to sleep to those stories, dreaming about them. Dallas wasn't hot or dusty in my dreams. The houses were covered with snow clean enough to eat. The front yards had snow deep enough to sit in.

When I woke, there was Sally and Nancy and Richard and Jõe and Mama and me living there on the chicken farm without much to eat. Chickenfeed fried in grease in a heavy black pan was what we had this morning because Daddy had been away a long time.



All we had of him now was a two week old picture post card from El Paso with a caricatured Mexican taking a siesta. Mama said he would be home soon, but she had been saying that for a long time.

If Daddy had been here this Sunday, he wouldn't have eaten the chickenfeed. He would have told the guy at the store about the new job he was getting next month. He could get credit that way. But Daddy didn't like Mama to charge at the store while he was gone. And Mama didn't, unless it was an emergency. She did pretty much as he told her because he was a big man who was not opposed to busting a woman's lip with his fist. And cussing in West Texas drawl.

"You must have horseshit for brains, woman."

And late at night while we were pretending to be asleep, we kids looked at each other in the dark when he yelled, "You and them damn kids ain't nothing but trouble to me." It always scared me and I wished Daddy would go away. But when he did go away, I wished he would come back. I lay there in bed in the dark afraid, but I never cried.

This morning I lay half asleep and watched my gangling thirteen-year-old sister Sally standing at the O'Keefe and Merritt gas stove shaking the pan so the chickenfeed breakfast would cook up to a thick brown mash that didn't look too much like what the chickens ate. Sally had on her dress, the blue cotton one. She stood with all her weight on her left leg, one hand on her hip, and her right foot on her left knee. She looked like a bird standing in that too long, faded dress.

When the food was cooked, the table set, and the water drawn, Sally woke Mama by knocking on her door and whispering, "Mama, it's ready. I'll get the kids up."

Then she went and sat at the table in her place and waited until she knew for sure that Mama was up and coming. I could hear the old dry springs on the bed and the screech of the dry wood when Mama opened her chest of drawers. Then Sally woke us up one by one, except for my oldest brother Richard, who didn't like being wakened by anyone. He heard the general confusion of three other kids waking up in one room and all the yawning and running out the door, creak...bam, to pee.

We five kids and Mama gathered around the table and nobody said the blessing. A drugstore heirloom picture of Christ praying in the garden hung on the wall above Richard's head. It was a fixture like the "Happy Trails, Amigos" mural at the store-- nobody really looked at it. The only other picture in the house was a photograph that had been torn from the Saturday Evening Post



and thumbtacked above the stove: a snow covered farm house with an icy creek beside it. Sally usually stared at it while she stood at the stove. The picture had burned itself into my mind until I no longer had to turn my head toward it to see it.

Sally passed the steaming plates around and poured the water. First to Nancy, then to Joe, then to Richard on the end, then me. Sally and Mama didn't eat breakfast today. They stood away by the stove and talked in voices I couldn't hear.

They came to the table and sipped water from our Ball jar glasses.

"I don't see how you kids can be so hungry. I'm still full from last night. But I guess you better eat up a good meal before you go out." Mama said this looking at no kid in particular. I think she saw us as one kid with five heads and ten arms.

Sally said only that she didn't much like her own cooking. She toyed with the red oilcloth on the table as she spoke, running her finger over and over a figure eight that was a part of the design.

Richard finished quick and asked if he could leave, but Mama said she wanted him to take us kids out into the hills to pick bullnettlles. They grew on bushes; they had sharp, spiney needles on them, and they tasted much better than chickenfeed. We always ate a few while we were picking. We had to knock the needles off a rock and then break the outer shell with our teeth. Inside was a semi-sweet, nut-like center that approached the taste of stale candy.

Nancy and Joe scrambled for the empty five gallon Southland lard tub that, upside down, served as a table in the living room. We would fill the tub with bullnettlles until we could barely lug it home.

Seeing that he would guide the expedition, Richard pushed away from the table and told us all to put on our shoes. When we were ready, he lead us past the dirt circle around our house and into the scrubby brush and browning grasses of the foothills--he prodded silently through the underbrush, Joe and Nancy followed carrying the lard tub between them, I walked in front of Sally, who kept an eye on all of us.

There were trails all through the brush leading nowhere. Jack-rabbits and tumbleweeds and a wild burro or two lived out here and walked these paths. Richard knew his way along most of the trail; he walked alone in these hills in the early evening--he said he liked the sunset. He took us almost a mile into the hills, straight to a patch of bullnettlles. We began to fill the tub, and the sound of our yelps and laughs rose as we poked the needles into our fingers.

There was no rush to get back home. Out here we were free to do

the kinds of things kids do. Richard howled like a coyote and rolled on the ground when he pricked his finger. Joe and Nancy wandered about and gathered sun bleached cow bones; they were scattered like flowers. We prized the head with teeth intact above all else. Nancy found a good head with a movable jaw; she moved the mouth while Sally ventriloquized in a low, mock serious voice.

"All you kids come over here. Set there quiet and don't eat them bullnetts whilst I talk."

"Oh, yes ma'm." Nancy said, laughing.

"You shore do look like a skinny old cow," Richard yelled, throwing a bullnettle at Sally. Sally fired one back and the free-for-all chunking began.

The fight became a moving battle going back home. We ran and strafed and withdrew. We went around and round in a maze of giggles and shouts and small pains.

The fervor of battle stopped cold when our house came in sight. A pickup truck was parked outside. It was Daddy. He was home.

Forgetting the lard tub, we ran wildly down the little hill overlooking our home. Sally shouted at us to stop.

We raced past the chicken coops into our dirt yard. We stopped at the back door and, holding our breath, we went in to find Daddy.

We saw his hat on the table, but we didn't see him or Mama.

Sally came in the back door and told us to get back outside. Just then we heard a noise from Mama's room. It was the rhythmic squeek of the dry bed springs.

Richard's face started to look like he might cry or hit somebody. He ran out the door and into the hills, out of sight.

Sally shushed and pushed Nancy and Joe and me out the door, into the West Texas dirt yard.

Erin Krisoransen

OLD MAN

Eyes, with tiny rivers of red,  
that have seen more than they tell.  
Cheeks, hollowed, reflecting a feeling inside.  
Narrow parched lips, that tell  
how it used to be.  
And a furrowed face, that tells  
how it really was.

An adam's apple pushing out from hiding,  
to be noticed.  
Veins protruding under the toughened skin.  
The back, rounded, defenseless,  
like a soul.

Chocolate brown spots of age,  
to remind us, lest we forget.  
The belly of a baby,  
wrapped around by baggy pants.  
Pants layered on the shoe top,  
dragging in the mud behind.  
Shoes, with age spots of their own,  
to remind us, lest we forget.

Gary Czerwinski

The red-winged black bird  
Calls across the rippling pond  
To answer the wind.



Karen Gunty

You say you love me  
You tell me not to worry;  
That things will be fine-  
Why, then, can't I believe you?

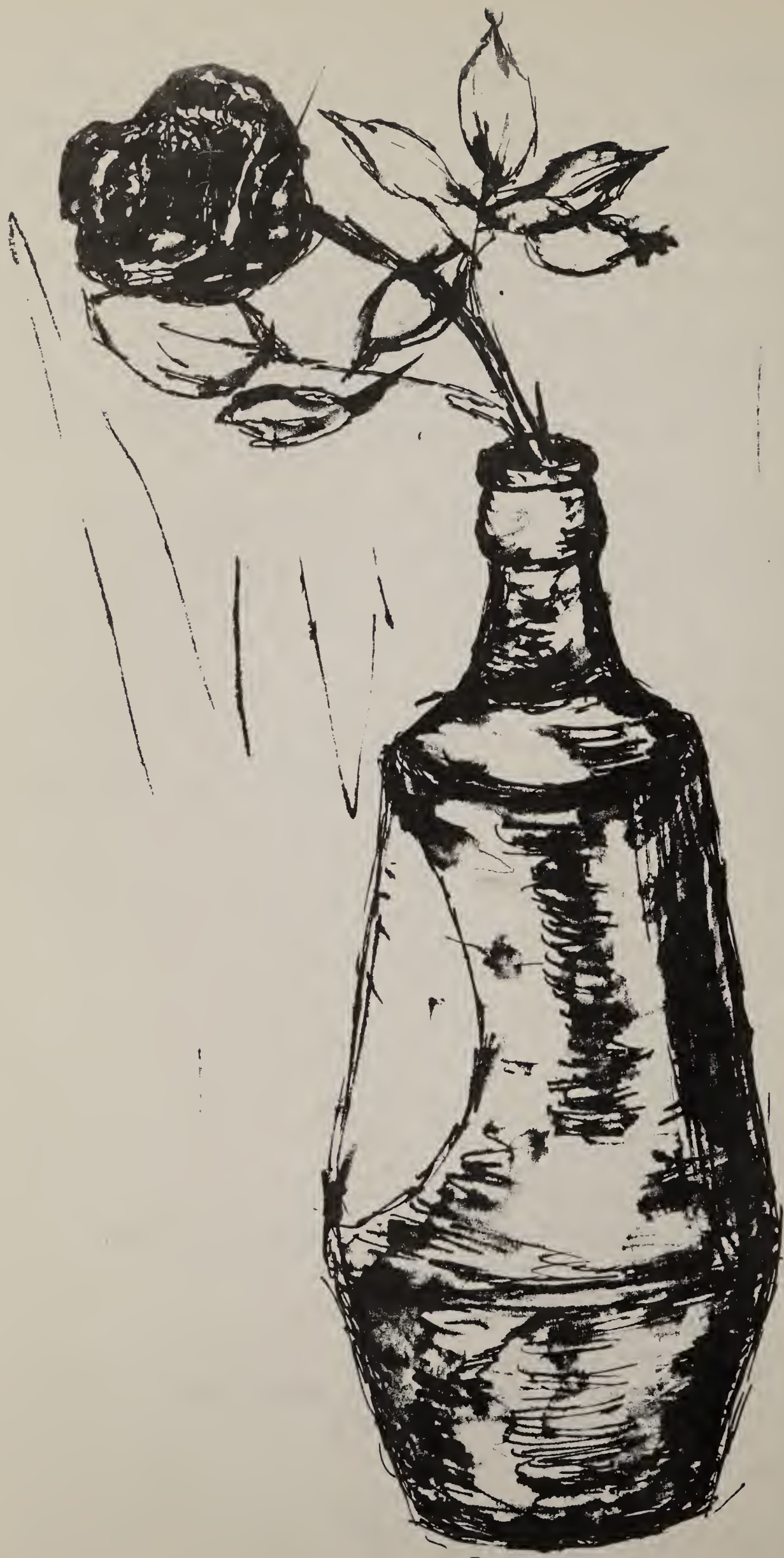
Is it because I see far deeper into your thoughts,  
than you have ever tried to see into mine?  
Or maybe it's the feeling that although I'm near you,  
a part of you is far, far away.

Will things be fine?  
Or is your vagueness, your unsurity, in itself a sign.  
Won't you push aside your barrier and fear not  
the love we share?  
Maybe then, my fears could be wiped away.

For I have begun to wish that it was I who was loved  
instead of loving;  
I who was unsure, instead of so very sure;  
And I have begun to wish that my feelings were less deep;  
my love less strong;  
And this, itself, is why I worry.

Priscilla Nemeth

Moving in the night  
Moving  
in the darkness  
Questions I have asked you  
Questions  
you will answer  
Stir beneath the past  
As we stir beneath our separate thoughts  
and in our separate beds  
Moving in our dreams  
Moving  
in the darkness  
My thoughts shall string toward you  
as I wonder feeling yours



the mail came...

i waited on the porch, in the rain  
till noon today.  
seeking solace and sympathy  
from falling leaves  
                    and raindrops...  
i knew the post office always came  
                    but the carrier didn't know  
                    of his life and death mission.

after awhile, i came to hear my heartbeat  
and the click of the balance wheel  
deep within my watch...  
Oh God!  
how the minutes drug by-  
slowly, slowly.

through the misting rain i could see  
him turn the corner and begin his  
march down the block.  
the corner house,  
    the markson's, wimbel's, stevens'  
on down the list.  
...then our neighbors; leaving their  
steps - down the walk - up the sidewalk -  
i must have been smiling in anticipation -  
...for he smiled back as he walked by...

i sense that part of me still remains  
in the rain, with falling leaves and  
rolling tears...



Gail Marston

Poem for Michael

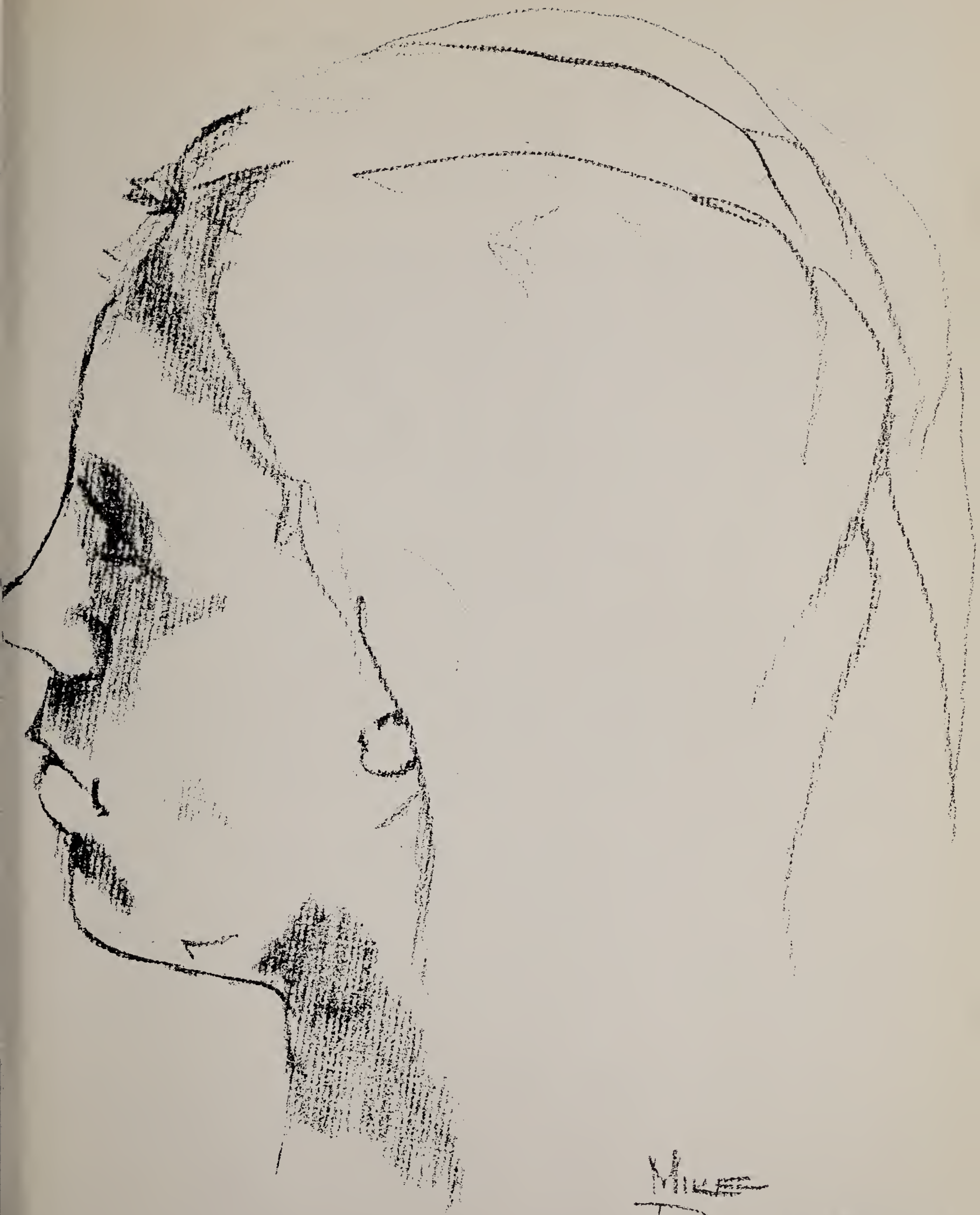
This is a poem for you, Michael.  
I write it waiting for the morning.  
I write it standing by the river.  
The birds fly low, swooping through the fog  
With wings spread to caress the air,  
Singing to welcome the coming day.

Today perhaps I will see you,  
And we may speak of architecture,  
    our voices burdened  
    with the weariness of too much thought.  
Standing there,  
    Would you know  
I am tortured by the thought  
    of your hands  
    (Never touched)  
Do you know  
    each word I speak, I place gently,  
    carefully before you  
Like small birds.

They want to hop into your hands  
    and nestle there - warm and expectant  
    of the coming sun.

Gary Czerwinski

In the waning day  
I walk amidst the orchard  
Where laden fruit trees  
Catch the glinting of the sun  
Preserved in golden harvests.



M. J. P.  
D. J. P.

Louisa

The voice of the obscene caller brought back the whole insidious experience. I held the phone at arm's length and collapsed, weak with waves of insistant nausea, on the edge of my bed. This voice too was low and guttural, yet thunderous in volume. "The same," I thought dizzily, "the very same!" I was powerless against the tremors of fear battering my every limb. The caller's message was lost, wasted effort on his part. I heard only the hideous voice, and long-suppressed, ugly flashes of that other time kept popping - exploding in my head like incessant strobe lights.

Sometimes later I realized the phone was dead. The caller had evidently spent himself on his obscenity and hung up. I replaced thereceiver and eased my trembling frame onto my bed. I lay back and surrendered to the malignant memories which I had overtly guarded from myself for twelve long years.

The fall of '58 had been my first semester at Briars, a New England girl's school of stern and shining repute, and I'd entered into this new experience with almost-morose seriousness. Between hitting the books and encumbering myself those extra-curiclar activities which would gleam synonymous with 'full return on investment' in my Mother's somewhat jaded analysis, there was little time remaining for exploration of self and freedom.

Finally, there came the trip home over semester break to face Mother's stiff inquiries...why B's weren't A's...why I hadn't "cultivated" closer relationships with the daughters of "people who were of real importance"...why I hadn't pledged the most distinguished sorority on campus...and on and on. Somehow, my Mother's caustic chastisement unlocked my rebellious spirit and I returned to Briar seeking fun, frivolity, and freedom.

I was ripe to roar and the needed catalyst was my new roommate, Adele Brannigan. Adele was a petite, vivacious girl from San Francisco with soft wisps of true-red curls framing an ivory complexion, and two of the most incredibly dark and shining eyes I'd ever seen. When I'd first met Adele, I'd been so fascinated by these contrasts that I'd somewhat inanely blurted out, "A Poppy, you're a Poppy!", and after the giggles had subsided the name had remained. Poppy was



asking all the "why" questions too, and since both of our backgrounds had enforced ladylike decorum above all else, life now appeared for us a tantalizing pasture of exotic grasses which we fully intended to graze our way through. We had sworn to regualte academia to low man on our totem pole of priorities.

Two days after my initial move to Poppy's room, we were deeply involved in the awesome task of administering a total face-lift from conventional dorm room to oriental pleasure palace. We were engrossed in creating Turkish lanterns from multi-colored construction paper when we were summoned, via a senior sister, to Miss Cruther's large and sunny living quarters on the first floor.

"Sit down, girls." Our staid and steady House Marm smiled these words upon our entrance. We seated ourselves on her somewhat traditional sofa of parrot-green, smiling back, assured by her manner that none of our more serious offences had reached her delicate ears. "As you are both aware, the room adjoining yours has been, up to now, unoccupied." Poppy and I shot each other a look of subtle, shared despair.

Rooms at Briars ran in suites. Each two rooms were separated by a bath and this trio arrnagement was called a suite. Hence, the usual placement consisted of two roommates who in turn referred to two more roommates on the opposite side of their shared bath as their suitemates. We had marveled at our great fortune in escaping the threat of suitemates who might not share our new dedication to moment-living. We'd further planned to turn the empty room into a library-of-sorts, filled with all the studious materials we owned so that no text nor test would remain in our pleasure palace to hamper illusion.

As miss Cruthers proceeded her wire-framed glasses bobbed gently with each tediously well-ennunciated word. "...and because you girls are so outgoing and because both of you made the honor roll last semester, it has been my decision to place as your new suitemate, Louisa Alkinson." She paused and we waited disheartedly. "Louisa is quite a shy little girl to whom I'm certain you girls will strive to accord the utmost friendliness and encouragement." She paused again and we all sat blandly smiling as she gave her precise words and phrases ample time for assimilation.

"Well, girls, I believe that is all." We rose in unison, quietly defeated in our plans, and turned to retreat. "Oh, by the way girls, one of your senior sisters has informed me that you have moved your beds into the hall and plan to sleep on your mattresses." She allowed herself two disapproving

clucks followed by a well-modulated chuckle. "Now really girls, Briars simply cannot allow this sort of thing. It shows a definite lack of decorum," -I bit my cheeks at this utterance- "...and I'm not certain of its health value. So, let's see now, the beds will be returned before lunch," she hesitated, effecting a somewhat narrow look with her eyes, "...and Louisa will move in directly after dinner." With grimaces all around sufficing as smiles, we exited.

Our beds were lugged back into our room, war was declared on all senior sisters, and then we separated to collect clues as to just who Louisa Alkinson might be. That evening after lights-out we pooled what information we had gathered while seated by candle light on the john floor. The info was sparse, strangely hesitant on the part of those who contributed, but opinions seemed to be without conflict.

"Here's what I've got," I began. "Louisa Alkinson is a straight A student, she rarely talks to anyone, and doesn't date."

"That checks." sighed Poppy. "However, I talked with Louisa's former suitemates, Rhonda and Lynn, and..."

"...and WHAT?" I urged.

"...and I came away feeling, well, strange."

"Oh, come on, Poppy, you're not making sense!"

"No, really Lo. They didn't want to talk about Louisa. I had to prod and push. Lynn finally opened up a little. She said Louisa rarely talked to them at all and when she did talk, she didn't!"

"What do you mean, she didn't," I asked somewhat sourly. I was feeling apprehensive and at the same time a little disgusted that the hair on my arms had bristled in spite of the warmth from the candle's flame.

"I mean she whispers," Poppy whispered. Feeling even more uncomfortable, I laughed aloud.

"Well maybe she's got a lingering case of laryngitis." I attempted a second laugh, but Poppy cut me short.

"Lo, remember that cute little girl from Texas, Bonnie Obronson?" I nodded, silent now. "Well she was Louisa's first roommate and she left very suddenly and no one knew why."

I took a deep breath, then expelled rapidly, "Oh, cripes, Poppy, let's be fair! Being quiet isn't so strange and she'll only be sharing our bath - not our room. Let's give Louisa a chance and not draw any conclusions until we've met her." Poppy's head gave an affirmative if shaky nod, and I quickly brought up the hayride planned with some fo the University



frat boys for the following evening. Soon all thought of Miss Louisa Alkinson wafted right out the small john window, riding the smoke from our illegal cigarettes. Yet, much later, stretched on my back, begging a sleep that wouldn't come, I did remember Bonnie Obronson. In fact, we'd been in the same Theatre Apprec. Class. When I'd first met Bonnie her chocolate-brown eyes were constantly asparkle - eyes that smiled even when their viewer wasn't - and oh, that accent, so heavy yet so genuine! Bonnie and her "Hi Y'all!" had been pure delight. Yet, Bonnie's metamorphosis had been so swift and complete - from gay southern belle to nervous, flightly Bonnie with crimson, puffy eyes - that in brief retrospect I had concluded that my first impression had only been dreamed.

The following evening I returned from the dining hall and upon entering my room, I heard activity beyond the bath. Replacing skepticism with a friendly smile and armed with new determination, I marched through the john doors and there, as if expecting me, stood little Louisa. "Small," I thought, "Incredibly small." "Greetings!" I said. It was almost a shout. She glided backwards to her bed, not uttering a sound, and with a limp, almost floppy movements - like a puppet who'd decided to function on her own - began struggling with the locks on a suitcase. "Can I give you a hand?" Still bent, she turned her head and stared. Slowly, as though unsure her neck could accomodate such movement, she nodded - once to the left - center - once to the right. Then she flopped upright and continued her stare. Her forehead, quite concave, seemed to serve as a giant umbrella causing her brows, surprisingly bushy, to furl, and giving her stare both inquisitive and dubious properties. The eyes were deep set, liquid, and so pale that naming them yellowish-green required imagination. "Well, have you met my roomo, Poppy - your suitemate?" I added, thinking clarity might somehow ease my own tension. Still no reply. We stared and her small, delicate nostrils began to quiver. Yes, quiver, and the longer I stood, fascinated yet repelled, the faster they quivered!

"Well," and I couldn't contain a heavy sigh here, "could you use some help getting settled?" She gave me a negative nod, this time quick, positive. "Oh, here's the bath," I said weakly, and waved my hand vaguely behind me. "Since we all dig privacy and both doors lock from the inside, we'll all have to remember to unlock both sides before leaving." I forced a giggle now, and to my alarm it came out a hiccup. "Otherwise, we'll be locking each other out of the john," and I ended with still another hiccup. "Well," I shifted position and looked



at my watch, only to find I wasn't wearing one. "I've got to run. Bye. See you tonight." No words followed my swift retreat through the bath to my own room. Weak and a little overwhelmed with my own sudden exhaustion, I plopped in our barrel chair. 'Strange,' I thought, 'totally strange.'

In bed that night, Poppy and I discussed our new problem and how to deal with it. "Look, we're probably being most uncharitable," I said. "Maybe strange and crazy are the wrong words here. Hell, she's just a lonely, uncertain kid. Probably over-protected all of her life. Let's give her every chance."

"Right," Poppy exclaimed. "Good grief, we've got to attempt to communicate. We're going to be living together for the next four months. We made a solemn pact to do all possible to make Louisa feel warm, wanted, and a part of things."

For two weeks we tried, really tried, and little Louisa was very trying. Twice I set her hair, each time returning to comb it out in a new style. I have no idea whether she found my attentions favorable or not. It went like this:

I'd steel myself and then bounce gaily through the bath and in to Louisa's room. "Hi! How are you this morning?" Louisa's dubious half-smile would be her only answer. "Say, I'm supposed to be rather good at hair. Like me set yours for you?" By way of an answer Louisa glided soundlessly to her dresser, opened a drawer and pulled out a brush, comb, rollers, and setting lotion, and sat herself sedately down facing the mirror. "Great," I said. "How about the bubble? That's quite the go right now."

She gave me one of her favorite stares. Her nostrils quivered. '-like a rabbit,' I thought, 'my god, she looks like a rabbit-' and then it happened: "O.K.," she whispered.

'Ahh,' I thought. 'Success at last! She speaks- well, whispers anyway.' Encouraged I began then to comb her fuzzy brown nest. Perhaps my choice of words appear unkind, but also true. No matter how many ways I combed, curled, teased, sprayed Louisa's hair, the results still resembled that of a hastily built bird's nest.

Those hair sessions in Louisa's room were always the same. I'd babble on with forced spontaneity about clothes, movies, classes, profs, books, etc., to no avail. Occasional whispers of "yes," "no," and "I don't know" were the sum total of Louisa's utterances. Always those liquid hollows followed me in the mirror, and always the quivering nostrils, as if tracing a scent.

Poppy tried in other ways: a bottle of Joyeaux, her favorite cologne, not acknowledged, but not returned - an

invitation to lunch, this brought a whispered "no" - and finally we admitted our defeat and the bath became just that and not a passageway to nervousness.

Briars had rules and regulations - mountains of them - and each peaked by more of the same. It became our mutual obsession to climb over, under, or around every one of them. NO SMOKING IN THE ROOMS had of course toppled long ago. The bathroom became our real pleasure palace and after lights-out we'd lock both john entrances, pad the cracks between the floor and the doors with blankets, crack the small window and light up. We'd settle in for long hours of gin, studying, and warm, easy conversation. Other friends sometimes joined us, smuggling in pizza and pepsi for john picnics. Everything went well, as Louisa retired early and never disturbed our late-night craziness.

Poppy and I dated every evening, and it wasn't long before the NO DRINKING MOUNTAIN tumbled down. As the semester grew longer, we grew even more brazen. There was the night we smuggled two fifths of Cutty Sark into our room under our ski sweaters, locked our door and Louisa's john door, and sitting cross-legged on our tiger rug, joyfully set about the task of getting bombed out of our minds. We were raucous that night - playing our oriental music, Poppy doing her Hindu specialty, lining up the stuffed animals as a stand-in for each senior sister, and then bombarding them with pillows - raucous - and then sick. Horribly ill in fact, passing each other on successive trips to the john. Miraculously, no one heard. Yet, reflecting now, Louisa, unless she was under sedation, must have been tuned in on the whole drunken escapade. I grow cold, considering Louisa and her quivering nostrils, lying stiff and alert or perhaps gliding to listen at her john door, taking us in. Not long after, a night spirit was reported loose in our dorm. Alarm clocks were turned off in the early morning hours, and several girls reported an apparition or eerie white figure gliding from their rooms. Louisa's old suitemates, Rhoda and Lynn, were reported among those who actually saw the visitor. Permission was granted throughout Kaufman Hall for all doors to be locked from the inside. Fantastic! At last we smoked openly, drank when our moods required it, and were finally free from the fear of some senior sister barging in and rendering havoc by turning informer. Most of our more intense conversations were still held in the john to afford the maximum in privacy



and shared intimacy. Here, often by candlelight, we whispered our innermost feelings, our conflicts, confusions, experiences, and disappointments. Here we explored meanings and began tapping the philosophical why - all the while with no thought of the quiet figure sleeping beyond the door.

We soon developed an expertise at appearing sober no matter how looped we might be. Sober enough to ease past Miss Cruthers: "Good evening, Miss Cruthers...lovely night Miss Cruthers", and one mate or the other holding the hand and head of her friend over the trusty john.

Louisa's presence was never really forgotten. Poppy had to relinquish her pleasure in wearing Joyeaux after the third bottle disappeared, this time from a locked dresser drawer. Cosmetics vanished at an alarming rate from the john. We were now prisoners of our own transgressions. Should we report these missing articles along with our suspicions of the thief--holy fishes--what our quiet little suitemate couldn't tell!

The number of showers Louisa took in one day and the length of time she monopolized in taking them was most disconcerting. We began keeping count. Her record was nine and her daily average was six. It was phenomenal. No matter how fast we raced through dinner, Louisa was faster, and we'd return to our room to find the john door locked and the shower running. As these pre-date showers were important to both of us, we soon became known as the "john beggars", and it wasn't unusual to pack combs, brushes, clothing, and cosmetics to some friend's room in order to shower and dress for the evening. Louisa had us by our sins and it appeared she was determined to bring us down.

Two weeks before the semester's end, I awoke abruptly to find Poppy staring fearfully past me, her hand clutching my wrist in a commando grip. "Poppy, what the...", but she appeared so distracted that I broke off and turned my head slowly to the object of her horror. There, on the other side of my bed stood little Louisa in her long, white granny gown. Nose aquiver, face expressionless, and eyes that seemed to whirl like pinwheels, she stared back. Then she began gliding toward our john door. "But our door was locked," I said carefully, and my tone begged for clarity.

"I used this," a hoarse whisper as she withdrew from the folds of her gown, a black wire coathanger. Suddenly stunned and defeated, I withdrew from the john door, and she glided through without a glance at either one of us. Poppy and I were close to terrified now. Yet neither of us could quite



face up to the homecoming scene with all the humiliation and chastisement that being expelled from Briar would entail. We decided to hang on if at all possible.

We tried sleeping in shifts, but with all the final cramming and term papers, we were just too beat to force awareness at the end of our long, chaotic days. At night we pulled a heavy dresser in front of each door, loaded their tops with bottles, precariously placed, and gave in to our fatigue... sleeping fitfully.

Our two most steady dates belonged to the same fraternity and it wasn't long before the Sigma Tau Ball loomed just two short nights away. Thoughts of Louisa and finals were shoved aside as our barage of anticipation and preparation took over. The party out-reached our greatest expectations. I was elected Queen of the Ball - the surprise was complete and thrilling - and toward the evening's end, Poppy consented to favor the crowd with her now somewhat infamous Hindu dance. She was received with overwhelming enthusiasm when, caution discarded, she leaped on one of the ball tables and began her exotic patterns.

We returned to our room, flushed and exhilarated with our success and an overabundance of wine. We whirled about our room, pressing our high to the last. Poppy taught me a few bawdy tavern songs which her father had sung when she was small. We tried a few variations, updating the lyrics a bit, and hummed and giggled over a final bottle of wine. Finally, both on our tiger rug, we passed on into slumber.

We slept until nearly two p.m. of the following day, at which time a hawk-faced senior sister beat at our door and informed us that our presence was most urgently requested in Miss Cruthers' office.

We were seated before Miss Cruthers metal desk, watching and waiting, and our House Mother sat, quite pale, watching back. No one had spoken. Miss Cruthers held a letter, quite a thick one, in her hands. She rotated this letter slowly, round and round, and her lips were pressed so tightly together that she appeared to have none. We all three appeared to be caught in some hideous time lag. Those slow cycling motions of Miss Cruthers had an hypnotic effect, as if we were all victims of suspended animation. At last her lips gave a resounding smack as she released them along with a laborious sigh. "I think," she said stiffly, "you'd both better read this." We both shifted slightly forward in our chairs, but she made no move to release the letter. Her stern gaze kept

shifting between the two of us as if she was trying to fairly ration out her show of displeasure. As she kept redirecting her stare between the two of us, I tried to draw some deeper meaning from her expression. Monumental worry, incredulousness, and extreme vexation all appeared as interwoven pieces in the puzzle that was her grim countenance.

With a second heavy sigh and no additional comment, she rose from her desk, walked briskly to the side of my chair, dropped the letter into my lap, and then returned and reseated herself in her desk chair. Her stare seemed wooden, permanent now, and fixed on me alone.

I picked the papers cautiously from my lap, shuffled them, motioned for Poppy to draw her chair in line with mine. I was amazed at my own deft movements, quite certain I had ceased to breathe. Holding the letter so both Poppy and I could share its contents, we began reading. A vicious attack on Poppy and me screamed from every page. Our every infraction of the rules was catalogued on these pages. Smoking in the john, smoking in our room, drunkenness, off-limits establishments which we had frequented, lost virginity, on, on, on. As the letter progressed, however, so did the perversions and distortions...yet all, I kept thinking, founded in fact. My torment increased as each page brought an ugly new torrent of accusation. The lines began blurring and I began fighting for oxygen. My head was growing, expanding, and my breathing had become one prolonged inhale which I struggled to reverse and could not. I grasped the chair and pictured my head exploding into bright red bits and pieces all over Miss Cruthers' forest green carpet.

We were nearing the end now, page 12, I duly noted. It concerned the frat Ball. Our attacker had us both dancing on the table, dancing nude, with the most warped and depraved of orgies following the dance. I lifted the page to find the beginning. I replaced page 12. The end. I stared at this sheet and at last I exhaled, long and loud. No name, no name, no name! This thought burst on and off in my head in red neon. I pressed the bottom of page 12 intermittently with my thumb, praying Poppy would receive my message. I hadn't the strength to look at my friend while reading the letter. Slowly I turned my head and our eyes met. Her face was two black coals on an ashen beach.

Somehow, we'd both understood the urgency of remaining absolutely silent. We turned our shaky selves toward Miss Cruthers. She patted her french twist, coughed delicately,



and silence reigned. "You're studying to be an actress," I chided myself. "Portray what? Confusion? Shock? Definitely hurt and bewilderment." I struggled with hurt bewilderment. I must have succeeded.

"Girls, this situation is most serious. That a student at Briars would deem it necessary to malign two fellow students is highly disconcerting. Of course, the letter is a parcel of flagrant lies. Why, I chaperoned the lovely Sigma Tau Ball myself, as you are both well aware." I managed a slow, affirmative nod - Poppy was crying softly. "Why, Briars could hardly place credence in an anonymous letter. You girls have done so well here. Perhaps a bit too high-spirited at times, but such is the folly of youth. Adele, do try to control yourself, dear. I find it beyond belief that two such charming girls could make such a vicious foe." She pointed an accusing finger at the letter, still in my lap. "The author of that is seriously ill and needs medical attention. Do you have any idea who might have written such a letter?" She waited. Silence recovered its awesome reign. Poppy, who had finally gained control, burst into fresh tears. I shook my head morosely. And then our silence was rewarded with a sudden, radiant smile of Housemother kindness. "I thought not! You girls may return to your rooms now. Adele dear, why not rest until dinner?" Neither of us spoke. She rose from her desk - all benevolence - and opened the door for our departure.

Back in our rooms we still hadn't spoken and then in whispered unison, one word: "Louisa."

Poppy went down for dinner. I'd decided to cut. I lay back on my bed, appreciating each cool wave of air from my window, and tried to think of nothing. Suddenly, our friend Sally Jens burst through the door. News of the letter was out. "Lo, you know who wrote that letter!" Not attempting to rise, I glanced toward the john door, then back to Sally. "Right!" Sally affirmed. "You're not going to let her get away with it!" I rose but did not speak. "Well, are you?" she demanded. I shrugged, totally exhausted now. "Well, I'm not!" she declared, and strode to the john door, opened it, flounced through the bath, opened the opposite door, and I followed her weakly into Louisa's meticulous if sterile room. Sally's eyes came to rest with haughty disdain on Louisa's orderly desk. With one angry swoop, she splattered books, papers, pencils, everything onto the floor. "Bitch!!" She spat the word into the air.



We stood silent, staring at the mess on the floor. I smiled wearily at Sally now. "I appreciate your loyalty. Poppy will too. But Sally, you know damn well that Louisa's hateful letter contained many elements of truth. We just can't risk retaliation when doing so might bring discovery and disgrace to our families. Come on, ol' buddy, and help me clean up your earthquake." We grinned at each other, reaching an understanding.

Sally let loose her famous tooth whistle. "Whew, forgive my Texas temper!" We laughed and it felt so fine... those first bits of humor in a terrifying day. On our hands and knees, we began picking up Louisa's belongings. Pencils had rolled under her bed. On my stomach, I reached for them, reached...my hand brushed an icy, smooth surface, then on to what seemed to be a wooden handle. I pulled. It was a heavy object. I was already trembling as my hand surfaced from beneath the grey spread and revealed to us the meat cleaver. "I'm going to be sick." I tried to rise, just making it to my knees. The room seemed alive with hot waves of nausea and dizziness. I heard Sally whisper, "Oh Jezzus", but the dizziness wouldn't permit me to lift my gaze, still fastened to the cleaver.

Suddenly, a blast of air and a harsh male voice erupting with it: "You God damn whore." Struggling to rise, to understand, I forced my eyes to seek out the gruff intruder. My blurring vision cleared and to my horror I found little Louisa jumping and gasping for air at the doorway. She flayed the air with her hands and her body jerked in spasms. From her mouth a torrent of four-letter words issued forth, many unknown, all ugly, and these words were sprayed across the room with sinister, hoarse screams. Sally was pulling at me but I couldn't move. The inconceivable voice raged on, and its owner's nostrils were quivering with monumental rapidity. The gravel voice raged on, growling each word now: "slut-whore-tramp..."

I was on my feet. Sally clenched my hand, pulling me through the john, then out our hall door. The thunder of abuse chased our race down the hall to Sally's room. We found Poppy and in terrified, paranoic whispers, repeated the hideous scene. We slept in shifts in Sally's room that night and the next. Whenever I drifted into fitful sleep, Louisa's secret voice appeared as a separate entity, chasing me down endless chambers. I'd jerk awake and lie trembling on the sweat-soaked sheets, willing my strength to return so I could rise

and change the bedding.

Finally our last day at Briars arrived. Poppy and I were nervously packing in our room. We were incapable of conversations; listening, watching the john door, cramming our belongings into boxes and trunks with all the fury of mad women escaping an institution. Whenever one of us would start at a noise, real or imagined, the other would squeeze a hand or give an encouraging smile. We'd been through hell together and were closer for it. A soft persistent knock now at the john door. We looked wordlessly at each other and clasping hands, we went to open the john door. There stood Louisa and behind her a short, pale man with the same liquid eyes. Louisa moved into the room and the man followed. "Daddy," she whispered, "I'd like for you to meet Lo and Poppy." I raised my eyes to hers. Little Louisa was smiling, a wide insidious grin. Those liquid pools twirled faster - faster; they stopped then and fastened on me as if to draw me in. The grin widened. She whispered, "They're my friends."







